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Talons

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One late-summer afternoon of that year, Audrey Spalding—my aunt Audrey—latched up her white-shuttered bungalow and rode in a taxi to St. Jude's where she intended to have her hysterectomy on the sly. She had dropped us a postcard: *Such heat! Headed up to the San Juans. Give you a buzz when I get back . . .* A little past eight the next morning she took a violent reaction to the anesthesia. Her heart arrested, was started, quit once more, and despite heroics would not take up its work again.

She was fifty-eight.

That was the summer, too, when my parents finally laid their marriage to rest, end of the grueling fresh starts and plummetings. My mother had gone to live with my sister Lil in St. Paul. My father had arranged to be out of the country for six months, overseeing construction of a pumping station for the Saudis. By contrast, it was also the summer—actually, late in May—that Faye and I married, the last forced show of family solidarity. Faye had baby's breath in her hair, a slippery white dress that showed off her collarbones. When I straightened after our kiss she pulled my head down again and there was laughter. We were toasted, hugged, wished every happiness. We drove off in a gusting rain, with fruit blossoms lacquering the pavement. We were twenty-one, delirious to find ourselves finally cohabiting. We had an airy, one-bedroom flat over Maxine's Dress Shop in Bremerton. *So this is my life*, I thought, walking the rooms, smelling their foreign, disinfected smells, taking in the maple dinette, the clawfoot tub brush-painted green, the gauzy curtains sailing and flapping in the cross breeze. Despite her euphoria, I caught Faye doing the same, arms folded,

shivering slightly, including me in that questioning look.

The family strewn, it fell to us to see to Audrey's instructions, typed on blue file cards (using the old Underwood Noiseless I remembered from childhood, with the *o* that rose above the line like an escaping air bubble).

She'd left them in her stocking drawer, marked *IMPORTANT:* Cremation, no service, a small get-together—we were supposed to dust off her bottles of home-made burgundy, drink what we pleased and divvy up the rest. *Whoever's reading this: Absolutely no tearjerking. I mean it, it was short but I had a great time.* She'd included a write-up for the *Sun*, which ended (so as to needle my father): *Never once voted for a Republican in her entire life.*

She'd left the house clean—fresh linen on her bed, only French's and kosher dills and seltzer in the icebox—but it wasn't clean the way you'd leave it if you thought you might not return. I threw out a squash blossom shriveled into a water glass on the sill, erased the single message on her chalkboard: *Call M./waterhtr.* Unloading a shelf in the pantry, we came upon two tins of letters to her from a man named Frank Leland. The first ones were dated 1955. Gummed to the corner of each envelope was a gold oval that said FRANK'S FRAME SHOP.

"You shouldn't look at those," Faye whispered over my shoulder. How can you not look? The one in my hand said, *Sweet, it's unbelievably dreary here. The straits look like tarpaper. Honest, I don't see how I can bear this much longer . . .*

But he'd borne it! Years of letters were wedged into the tins. Some had been ripped open, others scissored off at the end; some appeared to have been read many times. Now the worst of it dawned on me: in with the tumble of junk mail delivered since her death was yet another gold-stickered letter from Frank.

She hadn't told him either.

Faye and I went on piling Audrey's things, we boxed and carried and mopped with Pine Sol. That night we lay on the two halves of the folded-down daybed, worn out. It had been hot for weeks and no insects were left to bat against the screens. Out in the dark a dry wind sifted through Audrey's grape arbors. I couldn't sleep. I put my hand on Faye. She was tiny and calm, such a mystery to me still. Her skin was damp under the T-shirt, I could feel the fine hairs on her stomach.

"You'll have to write him, Sammy," she said.

"Me?" I said, turning, nestling.

"Who else?"

"What a stupid thing," I said in a minute. I was young enough I'd never lost anyone to death. I was angry, but it was anger I didn't know, as raw and chastening as the other feelings consuming me that summer. And mixed with it, like grains of fine gravel, was something else—I felt betrayed, straight-armed away from business of wonderful importance.

My beleaguered parents had shipped me off to spend the twelve weeks between eighth and ninth grades at Audrey's. Audrey taught junior high, biology and health, coached track—I was no mystery to her at all. She read my heart as if it hammered under plexiglass. She was fortyish, thin as a hurdler, tall, with wide bony shoulders and a solitary's habits. Later on, she wore her hair cropped, almost spiky, still the color of terra cotta—her skull was large and round, warrior-like—but that summer she had two tight-woven braids, bobby pinned in spirals over either ear, bangs wisping above far-apart gray eyes. Where my own mother had grown peevish, flinching at each day's fresh evidence, Audrey was stubbornly curious. "These two hemlock?" she said,

walking with me along the boundary of the old homestead. "We put them down the same year—they were about as high as your head. Now why do you figure this one's twenty feet taller?" I had to offer an opinion having to do with soil nutrients, hours of direct sun. "Uh huh," Audrey said. "Probably right. Then again, maybe one's just stronger. That happens." At home we didn't discuss why Audrey hadn't married—it was a fact, like the speed of sound, like the distance between parents. "I don't suppose she cared for . . . that sort of life," was all my mother had to say.

Mornings, Audrey tutored me in quadratic equations or tried to teach me bridge, afternoons we pruned the grapes or tied up the peas or swam at Dimaggio's—this was years before the red tides closed our beaches. Audrey's long white arms ripped out of the waves, jerking her ahead. I can see us lying on two towels, her black tank suit drying, lightening, beside me. At night she put me down on the daybed with the radio playing low. "Come on, cut the crap, Sammy," she said. "Tell me you love me!"

"Yes, of course," I said.

She bent and warmed my forehead with her lips. "Roses on your pillow."

Thus, Frank came as a shock.

All that summer he'd been in her thoughts! She'd read his letters, filed them in the cookie tin, then—while I slept?—settled into the creaky rattan on the porch and typed hers under the gooseneck lamp. Frank lived two hours north, a ferry ride and an easy jaunt along the water, but Audrey was never absent. No strange man ever shuffled up the steps of the bungalow and squinted in through the screen door, no telephone disturbed the peace at crazy hours. And there was no brooding in Audrey—or if so, it burned deeper inside her than I was privileged to see.

Faye was right, I had to tell Frank, but I put it off. I read the want ads. The rains came, I slid into a low humor. My letters of inquiry shot out like radio messages into deep space. All I'd found was day work, and this came with a jarring call, 6:20 A.M., maybe twice a week. Faye was working for three gynecologists. She left in a nimbus of Canoe, awake, white rayon rustling, new white Clinics going *chick, chick* on the tiles. She came home asking how went the job hunt, how went the pavement pounding, saying have faith, Sammy, I love you, don't get *down* on yourself. A couple of times she asked, Honey did you call Frank yet? I offered a fuzzy reply, slipped my hands under her shirt. Faye giggled, let herself be nuzzled back against the icebox before sliding away, flushed, to see about our dinner.

But one raw morning, waiting for a call, I found myself at our window. Down below, Maxine's customers moved heavily against the wind, their heads in snapping scarves. The bell over the door shook, rang distantly through the floorboards. I stood suddenly and got Frank's letters, dumped them on the oilcloth and tore into the first one my hand fell on. There was his left-handed scrawl spilling down a sheet of legal tablet. *I've been thinking about what you said . . . I've been thinking that it takes an immense strength, a kind of deep in the bone . . .* but I couldn't go through with it. I got my coat, took the bus to where our Falcon sat making rust in the doctors' lot, used the spare key, and drove to the ferry dock.

Frank wasn't at his shop.

"Mr. Leland's sort of retired," a girl in a crimson smock told me. "Hey, what's this about—?" she asked, as if I might be a snoop for the government. I tried to put her mind at ease. "You could call him at home, I guess," she offered finally. "If it's like *personal.*"

She bent and scratched the number on a sales slip.

I wadded it in my breast pocket, and went back out into the rain. But calling didn't seem like the answer. I stopped at a gas station and fished the address out of the book.

The house sat on a rocky hummock along the water, glass and weathered shingles choked with blackberry. A wind chime gave a few meek tings as I stood waiting, pine boughs dripping on me.

Frank came to the door himself.

He was an old man. I'd realized he had to be *fairly* old, still I wasn't ready. His skin was waxy as a Dixie cup, pale and reddish, hastily shaved. Long filaments of hair were varnished to his scalp. He had the eyes of an old bird. My thoughts ground to a halt. This couldn't have been Audrey's lover, not by a breach of nature.

I stuck my hand out. "Sam Church?" I said. "I need to talk to you. About my aunt Audrey."

Panic toyed with Frank's face, still he let me in, ushered me down a little corridor of simonized flagstones, and then we were loose in his front room, which faced the straits, and before I got a word out I was confronted by an enormous watercolor of my aunt, commanding the wall over a flowered sofa.

She had the feathery bangs, the two braids wrapped like shells over her ears. She was wearing a yellow-striped sundress I could almost remember. I looked at it for a long time.

"Mr. Church?" he said.

So finally I gave him his sad news. He uncrossed his arms and let them dangle.

He said, "I see, yes—I see," nodding, blinking. He asked if I wanted coffee.

My stomach was on fire. I didn't know what I wanted—not coffee served by Frank Leland. But then I was saying, "Well, sure, coffee'd be fine," and Frank vanished around a room divider. I

heard water running in the sink, and over the rush of the water Frank crying.

Now the front door opened and two women charged in, the one in the lead engulfed in purplish flowers. She could hardly see over the top. "*Frank*—" she yelled, then noticed me. I got up. She said hello, cool, unimpressed. She thrust the flowers into my arms and wiggled out of her coat. Frank appeared with the coffee. He handed my cup to his wife, I gave him the flowers and he disappeared into the kitchen for more cups. When he'd gotten that taken care of he came back and introduced us all.

The daughter, Sabrina, had the mother's round, disapproving face, the same arched over-plucked brows. I gathered she was living at home again, by default.

"Mr. Church here," Frank said to his wife, with a slight jut of the chin, "is trying his damnedest to talk me into chairing a committee for the hospital auction again this year."

"*Oh, Frank,*" she said, lips squeezing. "I thought you said you'd done enough for those people."

Frank said, "It's nice to feel needed."

There was a clattering of bracelets from the daughter. "Let's please not go through all *that* again, huh—?" she said.

"Frank's too generous with his time," Mrs. Leland said. "There comes a point when you feel you've given enough, don't you think? Some people don't recognize when they're being taken advantage of."

"Gee," I said, "I don't want you to feel like that."

I took a breath and checked Frank—he'd begun to look forlorn, rubbing the knees of his corduroys with both palms.

"If that's how you feel," I said, "don't worry about it. I'll just—I'll just call somebody else on my list."

That seemed, for a moment, to pacify the women. I couldn't think of an iota more to say about the auction. I tried a sip of my coffee—it was still scalding.

The daughter shook a Gauloise from its pack and lit up, then slumped back, richly bored, picking flakes of tobacco off her pointed tongue.

Mrs. Leland caught me staring at Audrey's portrait.

"That picture," she said. "You like it? I can see you do. Queer deal. Someone had it framed at Frank's shop, then never showed up to claim it. You couldn't ever track them down, could you, Frank?"

Frank shook his head, no.

"That was years ago, wasn't it, Frank?"

Frank hauled himself to his feet. He excused himself, not looking at any of us, and padded down the hallway, his steps strangely weightless. I heard a door close. Old man's kidneys I thought, not knowing a thing about old men's kidneys. Minutes scraped by in contorted small talk. No Frank.

A week later Faye and I were in bed. It was a work night for her, late, after one. I was keyed-up, rolling over and over, keeping her awake. I couldn't get Frank off my mind. I hadn't said a word yet about going to see him, but now, in the dark, it was all coming out.

"When I finally got outside it was still drizzling," I went on. "Big dead leaves were plastered all over the windshield. I couldn't *wait* to blast out of there. Anyway, I slid down into my seat and there he was."

"In the car? Frank?"

"*Yes*. Waiting for me, agitated as hell."

"Think what you'd told him, though," Faye said. "Think of all he'd just lost—"

"No," I said. "I understand that. But you see what he thought? He thought I was going to *spill the beans*. He thought I'd go back in and spoil his secret. Isn't that pathetic?"

I slid up on one elbow and tried to see Faye in the weak light. "It's so shabby—he's that old and he's scared to death his wife's going to catch him. What a life."

"Oh, Sammy," Faye said. "Why didn't you tell me before?" She reached up and rubbed my shoulder. "Honey—"

"I had to just about shove him out of the car," I said. "I had to almost get ugly with him. I mean he grabbed me, by the arm, he sat there staring at me, like some huge awful bird."

Far off in the dark I heard a boat horn on the canal, fierce and hollow, but close in there was silence except for our breathing.

"You won't be that kind of man," Faye said. "You won't ever be like Frank."

"God, no," I vowed, and lay in the dark, feeling my wife's touch on one arm, and on the other, Frank's, icy, like talons.